A Wedge-Gallery Grave At Baurnadomeen, County Tipperary

Preliminary Notice

By

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The last issue of our Journal contained a report on the excavation of the megalithic tomb of court- or horned-cairn type at Shanballyedmond in Co. Tipperary, just twenty miles from Limerick City. As this was an unusual tomb not only for the area but for the south as a whole, it was felt that an example of the normal southern Irish type—the wedge-shaped gallery grave—should be examined for comparative purposes. Accordingly, a well-preserved tomb in the townland of Baurnadomeen and adjacent to Shanballyedmond was selected for investigation. It will be remembered that there are about twenty tombs in this part of Tipperary, the Slieve Phelim hills, and that most of them can be visited conveniently using Rear Cross or Kilcoomon as centres.

The Baurnadomeen monument was selected not only because it was well preserved, but also because some of its features have importance in any general discussion of this type of tomb. The work took eight weeks in the period June to August, 1959, and the excavation party consisted of the writer assisted by Miss Birgitta Skarin and Miss Inger Johansson of Upsala, Sweden, and Mr. P. Doran of Athboy, Co. Meath. Five men were employed and the project was financed by means of a State grant administered through the Royal Irish Academy and the Special Employment Schemes Office, Dublin. As before, we are deeply indebted, both for practical help of various kinds and much hospitality, to various members of the Society, amongst whom we must mention Rt. Rev. Mons. M. Moloney, Mr. Killeen, Mr. Stewart and Miss Mary Duane.

The members who visited the excavation will remember the siting of the tomb near the top of a low hillock at the south-west base of Mauber Slieve (1,783’), one of the highest peaks of the Slieve Phelim hills, and the fine view in all directions—Keeper Hill to the north, Cullaun to the south-west, and Knockastanna to the south-east. It is difficult to know how far the builders of the Tipperary group of tombs were influenced by the scenic outlook. As we see the area now it is almost a moorland and is quite barren of trees except where very recent planting has been done; but at the time the tombs were built, it is likely that the climate was drier and that the whole of the Rear Cross area may have been forested. Unforested patches would have provided good winter and summer pasturage for cattle and since our tomb builders were probably pastoralists rather than tillage farmers, this may have been a deciding factor in selecting the area for settlement.

All around Rear Cross there are copper bearing lodes. Modern miners who began to work this copper in the last century reported coming upon
many instances of what they called "old men's workings." While we have no evidence at all to connect our tomb builders with this early primitive form of copper mining, it is just possible that they first came into the Slieve Phelims as prospectors looking for this new substance—the first metal of practical use—just then beginning to become known and for which there was a rapidly increasing demand amongst the wealthy cattlemen who had begun to come as settlers to Ireland a short time before.

The tomb itself was divided into two parts, a large and a small element, by a septal slab rising to the roof height, which prevented direct access from one part of the monument to the other. The small element was in the nature of a "portico" at the west end and the large element was the tomb chamber proper. The sides of both parts were constructed in the characteristic double-wall technique of this class of tomb. Massive cap-stones covered the chamber and "portico." The deposit in the tomb chamber had been destroyed by recent interference, but the 'portico' was found to contain five cremated burials, one of them accompanied by sherds of coarse pottery from a bucket-shaped flat-bottomed vessel of late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age type. Two of these burials were primary and three were insertions of a somewhat later date.

An unusual feature of the "portico" was that one of the Orthostats forming part of the north side bore on its inner face an extensive area of incised markings in the form of lines and grooves running vertically and horizontally. At first glance, several of them looked as if they might have been made in modern times by someone sheltering in the "portico" and idly working some pointed implement up and down the stone. Some of the deeper grooves were clearly visible above the grass level before excavation began and a close inspection of the stone showed that most of the surface of the slab had been so marked, but in the upper part, weathering had removed all but the deeper grooves.

If the marks had been made in modern times, it was expected that they would not go much below the grass level. It was found, however, that they went down exactly to the old ground surface, but not below this level. The marks on the lower part of the stone were covered by a layer of boulders deliberately put into the "portico" as packing and the three secondary cremated burials lay above these boulders. This makes it clear that the marks were made on the orthostat after it had been set upright in its position in the tomb, but before the boulder packing and the cremations had been put in. It is clear, therefore, that the marks are ancient, whatever their significance may be.

The tomb had been covered originally by a cairn of boulders, circular in plan, which concealed completely both the "portico" and its "inscribed" stone as well as the entrance to the main chamber. The edge of the cairn was retained by a kerb of large boulders laid on the old ground surface. Under the base of the cairn and only on the south side of the tomb several cremated burials were found. A few of these were in very small well-constructed stone cists set into the old ground surface; others were in unlined pits and the remainder were deposited in little heaps on the old ground surface. None of them had been accompanied by pottery or other objects. Perhaps it was this arrangement of central tomb accompanied by a group of separate burials all under one cairn which gave rise to the more elaborate multiple-cist-cairns of the fully developed Bronze Age, and in this connection, it is of interest to note that
there is such a fully-developed multiple-cist-cairn in the next field to the Baurnadomeeny tomb.

The exact date of the wedge tombs of the Baurnadomeeny type remains rather a problem. Several of them have contained, amongst other things, pottery of Beaker type, as, for instance, the Lough Gur tomb about eighteen miles away; but it is too early to generalise from this and argue that many or all of the wedges are of the Beaker period. The Island, Mallow, tomb produced no pottery or other datable objects and now this Tipperary example has failed to produce Beaker ware. The coarse sherds found with one of the cremations in the "portico" are of a somewhat unusual texture—they are thick but very corky in appearance—nearer to the true neolithic type than to any of the Bronze Age wares. Thus in face of the scanty and somewhat conflicting evidence available to us, we must be content to say that our tomb belongs somewhere in the second millenium B.C., though probably early in that period.